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SUBJECT: WINNER TAKE ALL: UPDATE ON LESOTHO'S ELECTION EVE

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CLASSIFIED BY: June Carter Perry, Ambassador, EXEC , STATE.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (S) Over the past few weeks, the Ambassador met once or twice weekly with other Chiefs of Mission (COM) as well as political party leaders, the Minister of Foreign Affairs (FOMIN), Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) Chairperson, international observers and civil society representatives. One of the most revealing sessions was the February 14 meeting with FOMIN, during which he predicted an overwhelming win by the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) party. We raised the possibility of a coalition government (after a limited briefing by the COMs and the Commonwealth Team), Foreign Minister Moleleki dismissed this out of hand saying that the LCD could never consider a coalition with renegade former Communications Minister Thabane, ABC Party Leader. He stated that the Basotho National Party (BNP) would actually come in second and that the LCD would take 70 to 80 of all of the "First Past the Post" national assembly seats in the National Assembly. The collective thinking following our Diplomatic Corps members, as well as those of observer teams from SADC, the Electoral Institute from South Africa (EISA), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the African Union (AU) and the Commonwealth, as well as NGOs, is that the election could be closer to call than the LCD is willing to reveal at this point.

¶2. (S) During the February 15 final meeting between the international community, the IEC Chair and members, and outside audit teams and political party stakeholders, and also representatives from the ruling party, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Trade (Executive Secretary of the Party), and the Minister of Tourism (Deputy Secretary of the Ruling Party), former Minister Thabane, ABC head, and the representative of the BNP. Former military leader General Lekhanya did not attend, but raised questions through his spokesperson. Participants at the session raised points of remaining confusion over voter lists, urged continued radio communications with the public by the IEC, and asked that all parties accept the results of the February 17 elections and ensure the process was carried out in a transparent manner. Despite the goodwill shown by the IEC, serious discrepancies remain in voter identification cards and lists. The call for peace and security was echoed most strongly by the Commonwealth Team, who endorsed the statement by the U.S. Ambassador and vocal commitment by Thabane to reiterate the need for stability to his young followers.

13. (S-NOFORN) One small political party, the National Independent Party (NIP) had views expressed by its 93 year old leader charging that his party's alliance with the LCD to ensure success of the ruling party, called into question the judiciary's decision in rejecting his appeal not to proceed with this alliance. Putting the history of Lesotho's troubled elections in the past in context however, several observers/training teams including NDI and the Commonwealth believed that in a short period of time, the IEC had accomplished a great deal mobilizing voter lists despite the questions that one expects will arise at some of the over 2500 polling stations across the country. The Diplomatic Corps is continuing to meet on a nearly daily basis regarding potential security problems and we are coordinating closely with the South African High Commissioner on border departures if necessary. The RSA Minister of Defense agreed to provide air assistance to Lesotho over the electoral period. End Summary

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Supreme Confidence -- Or is it Arrogance of Power?  
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4, (C) The extreme level of certitude the LCD holds was relayed to the Ambassador as she discussed the elections with Foreign Minister Moleleki on February 14. Already attired in his campaign safari shirt with wide brimmed hat at hand, Moleleki asserted, "not only are we (LCD) going to win, we are going to overwhelm them." He had been asked by us and others in the last two weeks how he could know this since the elections had not taken place yet. He was cavalier in responding that the LCD had met virtually "all" of its constituents and knew they were fully committed. When asked about the possibility of a coalition government, Moleleki retorted "absolutely not! These people (ABC) have tried to kill us -- first me, then (party executive secretary) Trade Minister Malie. There is no way we could consider a coalition." The FOMIN also predicted that the old Basotho National Party (BNP) would come in second, not the ABC. (Note: He has told others we know the same thing.) Also

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exuding confidence was Malie himself who sought out the Ambassador following a February 15 meeting of stakeholders. He asserted, as head of the LCD's party secretariat, that all of his people had been in the field; all the groundwork for victory was laid; and they were only awaiting final results which would vindicate their predictions of success. Moleleki and Malie are both LCD lynchpins. However, while Malie told us privately several weeks ago that he would be moving into the private sector (but retain his party role), Moleleki said to us he does not know which portfolio he would hold in a new LCD government. "I have decided to not focus on that," he asserted, but on negotiating closure of a farm he is purchasing in South Africa. Despite his stated acceptance of lesser posts (he mentioned "Agriculture"), it is widely believed the FOMIN covets the Deputy Prime Minister's chair en route to an eventual Prime Minister position in the future.

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Information Gathering; Diplomatic Corps Activities and Sustainability  
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15. (S) At this critical juncture in Lesotho's history, we have met and discussed in depth a wide range of stakeholders for the IEC Chair and Commission members as well as party leaders and members. In order to assure that all development partners had the opportunity to hear from all stakeholders, we Ambassadors have met at least weekly (5-6 envoys) in private settings. During these very frank and informal exchanges, the representatives (U.S.; Irish, South African, Chinese and UN) shared information we had received in our bilateral talks with party leaders. Dominating our sessions were two factors; the existence of "snap" (translated as "ambush" in Sesotho) and the potential for a close election, probably involving the LCD and the ABC. How will the ruling party react? How would youth leagues of the ABC accept a win or a defeat? As a group we had

heard, individually, from LCD leaders that they are certain they will win. The ABC leader has been "confident" but has caveated his statements with phrases such as, "if we don't win ....." All development partners consider the stakes very high with Lesotho in the SADC Chair, its profile and electoral outcome are viewed as impacting the entire region. Each bilateral partner has significant investments: we through AGOA, PEPFAR, a near-the finish-line Millennium Challenge Account package and Peace Corps, a mainstay of both the education, health and economic development sectors. The South Africans are entrenched on the water and investment sides; the Chinese in textiles as well as small businesses (with 5000 PRC nationals) across the country. The EU is involved in numerous agricultural, health and financial sector projects; and the Irish and the UN in health care as well as infrastructure programs.

¶6. (S) Through bilateral and multilateral meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister, Cabinet and party leaders, each envoy has unequivocally expressed the need for stability, no matter who is in power after February 17. We have been assured that the current GOL understands the high stakes and the leading opposition party leader has promised each donor continuity of on-going negotiations and initiatives should he win.

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Judicial Issues and Security  
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¶7. (S) During the February 15 stakeholder meeting, NIP Leader Manyeli recalled, in speaking before the group, that the LCD had made in essence an unholy alliance with his party in order to ensure a winning majority on February 17. Manyeli alleged that the Prime Minister himself had come to Manyeli's home one evening and said that he wanted the NIP to be the LCD's "shadow" partner during the national elections. Manyeli went on at length about how he told the Prime Minister that his party was not willing to do this and that he felt it would be an abrogation of the party's tenets to do so. Shortly thereafter, Manyeli said his deputy and several other party members had a separate meeting with the Prime Minister wherein they pledged their support for his proposition. When the list of parties was published by the IEC, Manyeli's party bore the eagle symbol of the ruling LCD. Manyeli went before the High Court to plead his case; the court agreed with him. However, 48 hours later, an appeal by the Deputy President and other members of the NIP reversed the initial positive decision for Manyeli. At the February 14 convocation, Manyeli said he felt this demonstrated that the judiciary had not acted in an evenhanded manner, a point that the Commonwealth Observer Team had, earlier in the week, shared with a limited number of other observers in the international community. In the end however, based on our discussions with observers and with the IEC, there has been, in their view, no law broken since the appeal reflected the court's final decision. This issue could resurface after the results of

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the elections are finally tallied. Stakeholders view the presence of independent auditors hired by the IEC as a good sign to help ensure transparency throughout the process that will take place on Saturday and in the review of any disputes after the polls close. Post will report on developments as they occur.

¶8. (S - NOFORN) Of special interest on the security front, the South African Minister of Defense visited Lesotho February 15 to meet with the Deputy Prime Minister following a request by the Lesotho Defense Force which had indicated lack of certain aircraft. The Deputy Prime Minister briefed the Diplomatic Corps and others on the outcome of his discussions with the RSA Defense Minister the very same day. Although initially, Lesotho had requested three helicopters, the cost of 30,000 Rand per hour for a projected 3-day stay was considered prohibitive. In the end, the South Africans agreed to place two helicopters at no charge in Lesotho on Friday, February 16 and to place one on standby at the Bloemfontein Airport (RSA) about 90 minutes from Maseru, in case it might be needed. The South African High

Commissioner, during our Chiefs of Mission meetings over the past months has taken great pains to reassure all Ambassadors and the UN that he would facilitate border crossing of our communities should any disruptions so require. At present, post has held a number of security briefings for mission employees and the assessment of the ARSO from Gaborone is that the situation is "tense but relatively stable". Post has deployed observers along with our National Democratic Institute (NDI) team, and its 300 local NDI/Lesotho Council of NGO's participants for Saturday, February 17, to observe the electoral process at polling places in 7 of Lesotho's 10 districts. The 2600 polling places will also have present key observer missions to include the US-funded SADC PF, the Electoral Institute of South Africa contingent led by former Botswana President Masire and police security teams.

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Comment  
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19. (S - NOFORN) Although it is impossible to completely predict the outcome of this election, it would appear that the LCD and the ABC are the top contenders despite the FOMIN's assertions that the BNP might come in second. We do not, of course, have full, inside information on what political deals may have been cut between the major and minor parties. Regarding security, the government has continued to reiterate its own commitment to peaceful polling across the country despite the fact that an estimated 10,000 citizens may not be properly registered; this situation could lead to small flareups in various locations. The ARSO has instructed all USG participants in the process to both report such incidents and to leave immediately should they occur. Likewise, Peace Corps has made special provisions for its 5 Chinese American volunteers as the Chinese ethnic group has been mentioned in a derogatory manner by several political parties and defended by none. To avoid any mistaken identity of these American citizens as members of the Lesotho Chinese community, methods are in place to secure them at a location across the border if necessary. The IEC expects to have some results late Saturday, but we anticipate that more accurate information will be available on Sunday, with the official, neutral, auditors' report on all balloting not available until Tuesday, February 20. With this election, finally, Lesotho does indeed stand at a crossroads in terms of its efforts to lift itself from the Least Developed Country category and move forward, with support from donors, on a path of greater democratic and economic growth and sustainable security. End Comment.  
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